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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0927
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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 0326
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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0191
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0117
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0016
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0195
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0141
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0078
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0078
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0055
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SUBJECT: COMMUNISTS SWEEP WEST BENGAL STATE ELECTIONS AND CONGRESS
WEAKENS IN ASSAM

REF: A) CALCUTTA 0071 B) CALCUTTA 0105 C) CALCUTTA 0134 D) CALCUTT 0148

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Initial May 11 state election results indicate that the Communist Party of India (Marxist)(CPM) and its Left allies increased their seats in West Bengal's 294-seat state assembly from 199 to 235. The CPM's victory is seen as a strong endorsement of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's more liberal economic policies. The CPM expanded its representation, gaining an outright majority, while its Left Front coalition partners saw a marginal increase in their numbers. In Assam, the Congress party lost its majority but still retains a significant lead over the regional opposition party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Muslim party the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) split from the Congress Party at the end of 2005, drawing away critical Muslim votes and weakening Congress. Despite this, Congress should be able to form an Assam government by creating a coalition with smaller, independent parties. The CPM's strong victory in West Bengal will give CM Bhattacharya sufficient political cover to initiate additional economic reforms in the state. However at the national level, the CPM leadership in New Delhi views the electoral victory in West Bengal as a mandate to confront more boldly the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) on economic liberalization and its pro-US foreign policy. Congress' weakening in Assam, one of the few states in East India where it has a presence, reflects its continuing difficulty in managing the complex regional and coalition politics of this area. End Summary.

Buddha Achieves Electoral Nirvana

¶2. (SBU) CPM and Left Front allies under the leadership of CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya will form the WB government for the seventh consecutive time. This victory saw a large increase in the Left's seats in the State Assembly, from 199 in the 2001 election, to 235 seats in 2006. The party tallies with most of the votes counted by 6:00 PM are:

CPM and partners: 235 (CPM 176)

Trinamul and BJP: 29

Congress: 20

Others: 7

(Elections for one seat have not been held due to the death of a candidate.)

Opposition party seats dropped from 2001 levels: Trinamul 60, Congress 26 and Others 9. Further consolidating its position, the CPM went from 143 to 176 seats, while its Left allies like the CPI, Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and others increased only by 3 seats. This puts the CPM over the threshold of 148 required for an outright majority and reduces its reliance on its more leftist and ideological allies.

13. (U) The Election Commission's close monitoring of the WB polls, including extensive use of paramilitary forces and holding the election in five phases, appears to have encouraged greater voter turnout. Participation was up by eight percent from the previous 2001 elections, with 83 percent of eligible voters exercising their franchise. This year's election also saw little of the intimidation and violence by party workers that has marred past elections.

14. (U) We attribute the strong CPM showing to voter support of the economic reforms implemented by the WB government. The reforms have stimulated economic growth to over seven percent in the last five years. The voters also rejected the erratic Trinamul leader Mamata Banerjee. Her campaign was weak and she purposely avoided creating a strong grassroots organization out of fear of potential party rivals. In addition, her ineffectual protests in 2005 against investments in the State by the Indonesian Salim Group portrayed her as anti-development. Congress, a marginal player in this election and struggling with party infighting, managed to hold its own and not suffer

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significant losses.

Congress Feels Pain in Assam

15. (SBU) The results in Assam were less clear-cut. Although they show Congress leading with 51 seats, it will not win an absolute majority of over 64 seats in the 126-seat assembly and must gain support from small, independent parties to form a coalition government. Because of Congress' weak performance, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi could lose his position. Although his major Congress rivals, Bhubaneswar Kalita and Anjan Datta, lost in their districts. The formation of the new Muslim AUDF party in late 2005 appears to have hurt the Congress party by drawing away its once reliable Muslim 'vote bank.' Muslims influence the electoral outcome in at least 20 assembly constituencies. The formation of the AUDF reflected a perception among the Muslim community that Congress was taking its vote for granted. The AUDF leadership accused Congress of failing to respond effectively, when the Indian Supreme Court declared the Immigrant Migrants Determination Tribunal (IMDT) act unconstitutional in 2005. The IMDT protected illegal Bangladeshi migrants from being deported. Congress' effort in April to amend the Foreigners Act with protections similar to the IMDT was seen as by the Muslim community as 'too little too late.' A Congress contact said that the party would first try to form the government with the support of the tribal Bodo People's Progressive Front- Hagrama (BPPF-H), Independents and other parties, and would approach the AUDF as a last result. Congress/AUDF relations became strained after the party declared that it did not want Gogoi to remain as CM.

The latest results for the major parties are:

Congress: 51

Asom Gana Parishad: 25

Assam United Democratic Front: 8

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) CPM's strong gain in WB is seen as a mandate by many observers here for CM Bhattacharya and his economic reform policies. In the past year, the CM had confronted party stalwarts like State Lands Reform Minister Abdur Razzak Mulloh, who had threatened to resign in protest over the sale of large tracts of land to corporate investors. In addition, the CM had been publicly critical of State Minister for Higher Education Satyasadhan Chakraborty, for not implementing education reforms meant to enhance the employability of graduates. Ultimately, all five of the old-line Communist Education Ministers were denied tickets in this election for being too ineffectual and rigidly dogmatic. Following his electoral victory, the CM can be expected to initiate more reforms and efforts to attract private investment in apparent contradiction of the CPM's ideological principles. Bhattacharya has already announced a desire for a new Calcutta airport, financed and managed by private investors, even while the CPM national leadership is protesting UPA plans to privatize Mumbai and New Delhi airports.

¶17. (SBU) Ironically, at the national level the CPM leadership will likely take the opposite tack, using the election results to pressure the Congress-led UPA to back off from economic reforms and closer relations with the US. CPM MP Mohammad Salim commented to Post that the election results demonstrate that Congress cannot take Left support for granted, particularly on the issues of reform and foreign policy.

¶18. (SBU) Congress' poor showing in Assam contributes to its waning in Eastern India. The results demonstrate that at least in this area, Congress is failing to manage regional and coalition politics. In a region with almost a third of India's population, Congress appears to be a fading presence, having,

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aside from Assam, a government in Arunachal Pradesh and a weak coalition government in Manipur.
JARDINE